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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 000122

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PUTS DOWN MARKER WITH CENTER-LEFT ON
IRAQ PULLOUT

REF: A) ROME 85 B) 05 ROME 3179 C) ROME 4064

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary. The Ambassador on January 11 told Daisy Party leader Francesco Rutelli that the Center-Left could not begin its relationship with the United States in a worse manner than to unilaterally declare a withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq in the event of a Center-Left victory in the April 9 elections. End Summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador pulled aside Daisy Party leader Francesco Rutelli at a January 11 reception for visiting Codel King. He told Rutelli that we had heard (ref a) that the Center-Left intended to announce, immediately upon winning the elections, its intention to withdraw from Iraq. Ambassador noted that Center-Left coalition leader Romano Prodi's international affairs adviser, Ricardo Levi, had assessed that center-left coalition dynamics would require that this be accomplished no later than the end of 2006, and likely within three to six months of a new government assuming office. Levi had said the new government was expected to begin its work in the second half of June.

3. (C) Speaking in Italian, the Ambassador told the Daisy leader that there was no step the Center-Left could take at the outset, to get off more on the wrong foot with the United States, than to unilaterally declare that it was leaving Iraq. Rutelli seemed somewhat taken aback, and made reassuring noises about the Center-Left's desire to consult prior to any announcement, as well as its intent to look for other ways to stay engaged in Iraq beyond the military commitment. But he did not take direct issue with the gist of our recent briefing by Prodi Adviser Levi on Center-Left intent to make an immediate announcement on withdrawal if it won the elections in April.

4. (C) Pol M/C reinforced the message separately with Rutelli at the same event, noting the political as well as practical importance of Italy's troop contribution and the need to be extremely careful with public comments in the interest of Iraqi security and stability.

5. (C) Comment: Rutelli got the message, but we will continue to follow up with him and others. However, we suspect Levi correctly flagged the center-left's bottom line: they will consult to ensure maximum stability and security, but not accept a completely open-ended conditions-based arrangement. End Comment.

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